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THE TRAFFIC IN SPURIOUS PICTURES.—A WARNING TO THE AMERICAN COLLECTOR.

BY A PARIS AUTHORITY.

“At the request of several auctioneers, and on the warrant of a *Juge d’Instruction*, a Commissary of Police in the Faubourg Montmartre quarter visited the sale-rooms of the Hôtel Drouot this week and seized numerous ‘faked’ pictures bearing the signatures of Boudin, Corot, Courbet, Harpignies, and Jongkind.”—*Special Paris Cablegram to a New York Newspaper.*

WITH what astonishment must the American public—and especially American picture-buyers—have read the above cablegram, a few weeks ago, in their morning newspaper! “What?” I can imagine some millionaire connoisseur exclaiming, as he recollects that, on his last visit to Paris, he bought a number of modern pictures at this very Hôtel Drouot. “What? Purchasers are not protected against fraud in these official sale-rooms? In spite of official experts and ministerial officers empowered with enormous authority, and receiving still more enormous salaries, spurious pictures may be put up for auction and, but for the opportune appearance of a Police Commissary, may be sold as genuine works of art? I wonder if the Millet I bought there last spring is really by the master!” Such a state of things is, indeed, surprising to any one who is not behind the scenes, who is unacquainted with the shady side of the Paris picture trade. And as few wealthy American connoisseurs *are* acquainted with it, I shall endeavor in this article to open their eyes to some of the dangers with which they are threatened when they add to their galleries from the Parisian picture-market.

New though this subject will be to the people of the United States, it is a very old one to Parisians. The articles which have been written against the present vicious system would, if collected together, form many volumes. Some of them, as those which ap-

peared in the "*Gazette des Beaux-Arts*" about 1860, date back nearly half a century. Yet, for all that, nothing has changed; nay, the trade in spurious pictures, not to mention that in spurious works of art in general, is carried on on a larger scale than ever before. Never have the fraudulent practices of picture-dealers and "experts" been so barefaced as during the last few years.

One of the principal reasons why "faked" pictures continue to be sold at the Hôtel Drouot (and, consequently, at the dealers', for, once a picture has been sold there as genuine, it passes into circulation as such) is the well-known ignorance of the auctioneers. What are the necessary qualifications for exercising this calling? None whatever, except a sum of money large enough to purchase a post. A Paris auctioneer need have no artistic knowledge. "But," some one may say, "does he not acquire it after a few years' practice?" Possibly; but how many years will it be, presuming he possesses an aptitude for judging pictures, before he gains experience, and, meanwhile, how many "fakes" pass through his hands and are sold as genuine? "But is he not assisted by an expert?" some one else remarks. That is quite true. But what an expert! I imagine that magic word, which has so long opened all doors and enabled swindle after swindle to be committed officially with impunity, has lost a good deal of its glamour.

The expert in a Paris picture sale has no responsibility whatever. Yet he it is who presides over the sale, who draws up the catalogue in any manner he thinks fit, and who packs the sale-room with his friends and accomplices, with whom he is frequently agreed as to the opportune moment of putting up this or that work of art. The interests of the venders, and these are often widows or minors, are entirely in his hands, and, if he is so disposed, he can sacrifice them without fear of anything worse than reproach. On the occasion of a recent sale at the Hôtel Drouot, a certain expert, who, as is frequently the case, is also a dealer, placed a value of 150 francs upon a picture. One of the spectators, recognizing that the canvas was a good one and worth much more than the price placed upon it, bid again and again. The expert was also very anxious to have the picture, so much so, in fact, that he bid up to the sum of 1,200 francs before securing it. No sooner had the picture been knocked down to him at this price, than a well-known Parisian art critic rose and

reproached the expert with offering 1,200 francs for a work which he had valued at only 150 francs. It more frequently happens, however, that the "expert" is distinguished for his crass ignorance. The author of one of the articles already referred to, touching upon this very point, wrote:

"I accuse no particular person. I simply refer to the body of Parisian experts in general. What is the meaning of this title 'expert'? I am in absolute ignorance as to what examination they have passed, or as to the jury from whom they have received their diplomas. . . . I am astonished that, in a country where one so often encounters instances of the jealous supervision of the government, guarantees, both intellectual and monetary, are not required from those who are intrusted with such delicate duties. I am, above all, astonished that those ministerial officers, the auctioneers, have not been the first to point out this omission from the laws in regard to a body of men who daily act as intermediaries between them and the public. How is it that collectors do not more often protest against false attributions and, in addition to that, claim for the losses which they occasion?"

The Parisian picture expert need, in fact, have received no instruction whatever in art, and, as sometimes has happened, he may formerly have carried on the business of a hair-dresser! Or he may have been a commercial traveller, a wardrobe-dealer, or a vender of photographs. All that it is necessary for him to do is to learn by heart a number of art terms in current use, and place the word "expert" over the door of his shop. How can one expect such a man as this to distinguish spurious from genuine works of art, when even a painter himself is often at a loss to say whether or not a certain picture is really from his brush? The case of the great animal-painter, Charles Jacque, contesting the authenticity of one of his early and rather important pictures at a sale conducted by M. Charles Pillet, will be fresh in the memory of every one who has read the biography of that master of the 1830 school. Jacque recognized his error, after a more attentive examination than he had at first given to the work; but he would probably never have done so but for the chance presence at the sale of one of his former pupils, Maître Boussaton, who, distinctly recollecting the time at which the picture had been painted, begged him to make a final call on his memory.

Notwithstanding the little real value which is to be attached to the word "expert" or "*expert près les tribunaux*" which one sees over the doors of many Parisian picture-dealers, it is surpris-

ing what confidence it inspires, and how infallibly it attracts or retains customers. The possession of this magic title enables a dealer to deliver judgment on all questions appertaining to art, and without fear of contradiction. Picture-buyers place implicit faith in his dicta, pay him handsomely and are content.

Not very long ago, a gentleman, whom I shall call A——, had two pictures by Manet for sale. They had been bought from Madame Manet, on the death of her husband, and are recorded in the catalogue of the painter's works drawn up by M. Duret, so cannot be regarded as otherwise than authentic. Placed in relations with an American connoisseur, A—— showed him the pictures, and as these were found quite satisfactory a bargain was concluded. It was agreed that the canvases should be delivered at the connoisseur's hotel within twenty-four hours, the bill being paid on presentation of the works. On leaving A——'s house, however, the American, who was accompanied by a friend, possibly an adviser, thought he would call upon a certain expert and picture-dealer, whom we will label B——, to distinguish him from the vender. In the course of conversation, the purchase of the Manets was mentioned, whereupon B—— instantly declared that he knew the pictures were forgeries. Great was the American's surprise, and, as he placed a good deal of confidence in the expert's knowledge, he at once decided he would inform A—— that he had changed his mind. Astounded in his turn, A—— began to make inquiries as to the reason for this sudden change; and finding, after a lapse of several weeks, that B—— was at the bottom of the mischief, he determined the expert should see the pictures. Face to face with the two Manets, the dealer declared that he was "quite unaware of their existence" and that they were undoubtedly genuine. "How is it, then," he was asked, "that you declared they were forgeries?" "You are mistaken," was the reply; "it was not I, but my sons who said that." B——'s sons, being also invited to inspect the works, likewise declared they were genuine, and this is the excuse which the father, speaking to one of his friends, a few days afterwards, made in their defence: "My sons' reply was, after all, quite natural. Picture-dealers, possessing a large selection of works of art, including pictures by Manet, cannot undertake to assist others to sell their property!"

Why picture-collectors, who generally possess infinitely greater

knowledge of pictures than their experts, should place such faith in the verdicts of these people is one of the little mysteries of human nature. I suppose it arises from a desire on the collector's part to escape all responsibility. If an error has been committed, he can blame his expert; if he has paid too dear for a picture, he can tell his friends that it was the expert's fault; or, if he has missed the chance of getting hold of "a good thing," he can still find fault with his expert's judgment.

A few days before writing this article, I came across the following paragraph in a Paris morning newspaper:

"Do our readers know that there exists in Paris a manufactory in which artists, receiving large salaries, copy the canvases of the great masters? These pictures are sent to the United States, a high duty is paid upon them, and, being thus stamped as authentic, they are then sold for their weight in gold to American millionaires. In the gallery of one of these collectors can be seen quite a number of pictures the originals of which are either in Paris or in the provinces."

But one alteration need be made to these words: the writer should have said "a number of manufactories," for they simply swarm in the Montmartre and Montparnasse quarters, without counting those which are in the suburbs and provinces. Some are attached to this or that dealer-expert, whilst others undertake to supply the "trade" in general. As the same picture is copied several times—generally, however, with variations,—these copyists no longer have need of an original; a simple copy is all that is necessary. There you have the explanation for there being so many spurious Charles Jacques, Henners, and Ziems on the market. And, no sooner has an artist attained a reputation, than immediately an army of forgers set to work to imitate him.

In the case of Ziem, whose works are imitated on a larger scale than those of any other living artist,—and mentioning his name reminds me that Jules Claretie, of the French Academy, recently related in the "*Temps*" that the painter once refunded to a lady a large sum of money which she had paid for several spurious works bearing his signature,—in the case of Ziem, one has only to compare his (alleged) canvases in the shop-windows of certain large dealers with those at other dealers' to see that they represent a variety of manners and notes, which can only be explained by the fact that each imitator has put something of his own style of painting into his copies of the master's Venetian scenes. Fraud

is carried on to such an extent that the forger no longer waits for an artist's death. Not many months ago a consignment of twenty-nine pictures, all of them copies of works by three living artists, was seized at one of the ports just as they were about to be taken over to the United States.

Twenty years ago, when pictures of the 1830 school were all the rage, thousands of copies of canvases by Corot, Diaz, Dupré, Daubigny, Théodore Rousseau, Troyon and others were sent in that way to America. Dealers had in their employment a small army of imitators of those great painters. These *pasticheurs* worked, some, near Fontainebleau, others, in the neighborhood of Cernay, every week bringing in their work, signed, of course, with famous names. All the canvases by pupils of Corot, Diaz, and the others—men who had worked more or less in the style of their masters—which could be found were collected and re-signed. How is it that nowadays so few pictures by Villers and Mazon can be found? The many works which those excellent painters produced have not been destroyed. No; they have not been thrown away as worthless, because of the greater renown of Millet and Corot; they are hanging at this very moment in the galleries of great collectors, but baptized with other names than those of the men who painted them!

Here is another instance of what used to be done about the year 1880. A certain dealer in Paris bought one picture by each of the following painters: Corot, Daubigny, Diaz and Théodore Rousseau. Engaging a clever copyist at a salary of 1,000 francs a month, and providing him with a house and garden in the country, he set him to work to copy each picture twenty-five times, slightly varying the subject in each case. The hundred copies were produced in ten months, during which time, according to agreement, the painter saw no one save his servant. All these copies were sent to the United States and sold as originals from the collections of this or that well-known Parisian.

Very much the same thing is done nowadays in the case of eighteenth-century pictures. As in 1880, huge fortunes are being made by dealers who, ten years ago, were unknown in the picture trade. In forging old pictures, generally portraits, not only the copyist, but the painter-restorer, plays a part. The way in which the latter proceeds about his work will be seen from what follows.

A dealer collects together a number of pictures by one or other

of the numerous old masters whose works are not in vogue—if possible, pictures by a painter who worked somewhat in the style of this or that famous artist; and from these, by means of skilful retouching, the painter-restorer produces works which are signed Rembrandt, Ruysdael, Hobbema, Raphael, Boucher, or Watteau. Placed in the shops of dealers who are supposed to be honest, these canvases find a ready market among wealthy collectors, who almost invariably trust another person's opinion in preference to their own. In the case of portraits and pictures containing figures, such as those by Largillière, which, like Nattier's works, are just now rising in value, a similar method is adopted, only care is taken to select pictures the light parts of which are uninjured and as near as possible in the style of the master whose work is to be imitated. With the assistance of good engravings, the drawing is slightly altered; half-tones and shadows are added; and, by means of glazes, the necessary piquancy and effect are produced. Naturally, canvases of the correct period, and genuine old stretchers—or panels, in the case of painters who usually painted on wood—are selected. Thus, a worthless portrait of, say, an old woman is turned into a picture of a pretty, bright-eyed damsel, which, under the name of either Nattier or Largillière, will "embellish" the gallery of some transatlantic connoisseur.

The patina and cracks of old pictures require very skilful imitating. Some picture-forgers use saffron, bister, liquorice or black coffee, which have now replaced bacon rind, so much used in former years. When this has been applied and is quite dry, the picture is varnished. Sometimes thick oil is added to the varnish, or it is colored with bitumen, yellow lac and red ochre, which give almost exactly the tone of old varnish.

Lest some of my readers may be inclined to think that I have exaggerated the dangers which the unwary American collector runs in placing his interests entirely in the hands of certain Parisian dealer-experts, let me here state that many of my facts have been obtained from a well-known French collector who, on more than one occasion, has detected the numerous tricks to which these unscrupulous tradesmen resort. My thanks are due to him, not only for the invaluable fruit of his experience, but also for his kindness in placing his library, and above all his annotated catalogues, numbering some 20,000, at my disposal,

catalogues which, he tells me, have often saved him from purchasing spurious pictures. He said:

"When a picture is offered to me, I at once refer to the catalogue of the collection from which it is said to have come, and find out for myself if that is really so. I have frequently discovered, thanks to the indications as to prices, etc., written in my catalogues, that pictures or other works of art have been withdrawn as forgeries or doubtful. Once I found that the picture offered me—it was a Watteau, said to have come from the Morny Sale, and it was afterwards sold as such to a rich American—was another work altogether. But look for yourself and you will see that the Duc de Morny's Watteau was bought by the Marquess of Hertford, and, as every one now knows, it figures to-day in the Wallace Gallery in London. Had your compatriot but possessed this annotated catalogue he would have saved I don't know how many thousand dollars."

On my remarking that it must not be easy to get together so precious a collection of documents, my friend continued as follows:

"No; it is not easy unless you possess ample means. But what is a sum of ten or twelve thousand dollars to one of your American millionaires? And for much less than that a connoisseur could form a similar collection of catalogues to my own; he has only to apply to the same quarter . . . and he can obtain annotated duplicates. I have not the slightest doubt that, as in my own case, he will find the investment is a good one."

This French connoisseur's superb collection of catalogues has come from various sources, the autograph annotations being by such celebrated experts and art critics as Paillet, Regnault Delalande, Duclos, Thore Burger, Philippe Burty, and Eugène Piot. The names of these men are alone a guarantee of the accuracy of the information which they have handed down for the benefit of future critics and collectors. Here are a few instances of the valuable data which these catalogues contain:

"1868. Collection of his Excellency Khalif-Bey, containing many first-class pictures. Two Fromentins were declared at the sale to be mere copies."

"1869. Collection of Koucheleff Besborodko, containing pictures by Dutch and Flemish masters. Several were pronounced forgeries, including one Albert Cuyp, one Rembrandt, etc."

"1870. Collection of San Donato. Most of the Creuzes were copies. Three Paul Delaroches were likewise forgeries. Yet, in spite of the fact that they were known by critics and experts to have been the work of a painter named Berenger, they were sold as originals at high prices."

"1876. Schneider Collection. Two Rembrandts were sold as doubtful."

"1899. Collection of Comte Doria. Amongst many fine examples of the 1830 School, quite a number of forgeries were put up for auction at this sale. They were, however, withdrawn, or at least some of them."

"1899. Collection of Madame Richard, *née* Bournet Aubertot. A Nat-tier, although declared to be a forgery by many well-known judges who were present at the sale, was sold for 49,500 francs."

"1900. Guasco Sale. At this sale a Troyon was falsely ascribed as having been in the collection of the painter. Moreover, it bore the stamp of the Troyon sale."

"1900. Rey Sale. A Raphael was sold, but the description in the catalogue is not that of the work put up for auction; it applies to quite another (genuine) work."

Now, let me ask American connoisseurs if they really think that the above-named forgeries are not still in existence. Their reply can only be: "Certainly, they are still on the market." Depend upon it, many of these pictures are in great collections in France, England and the United States; and from time to time, at the death of their owners, they are once more sold as originals. Some are still in the hands of unscrupulous dealer-experts, who, on offering them to collectors, produce catalogues (un-annotated, you may be sure) of the famous sales at which they were sold, or withdrawn. I would that some public library in the United States possessed, for the protection of American picture-lovers, such a collection of catalogues as that owned by my obliging friend.

I am fully aware that, in revealing the fraudulent tricks of picture-dealers, I shall have deeply wounded their *amour-propre*. But, by opening the eyes of American collectors, I shall have done service, not only to them, but to those dealers who have for years past regarded honesty as the best policy. The interests of a number of unscrupulous *marchands-experts* should not be allowed to interfere with those of honest members of the trade.

A PARIS AUTHORITY.